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Reality of Womanism in the Suffering and Murder of Desdemona in William
Shakespear's Othello

Abstract

Othello is one of the most tragic play of William Shakespeare. Its tragic element also applies to its characters in the play. The whole play resembles the downfall of each character including the heroine, Desdemona and the hero, Othello in the play. The character of Desdemona was so framed in such a way as she represents the Seventeen Century English woman, who favors for love and affection and bind to be in the good looks of their beloved. Of all the deaths that happen in the story of 'Othello', the suffering and murder of Desdemona is most ill-fated and underserved. She carries a royal delicacy and a beauty is admired by many young men who fall for her love. But she loves one and only Othello, The Moor who misinterprets her innocence which in turn leads to loss of love and affection and hence leading to meet the tragic end. Desdemona is stuck in a dilemma of not knowing the cause of her husband's lack of love and her own innocence This article deals with Desdemona as a central character in the play and her sufferings and cause of murder by her own beloved husband, Othello.

Keywords

Innocence, Beauty, Love and affection, Sufferings, Murder, Betrayal

Introduction

The greatest poet and a playwright, William Shakespeare is (1564-1616) a wonder of our age. He was a trained first as an actor, second as a reviser of old plays and finally he became an independent dramatist. He was closer to the public which made him write and revise according to their taste. So, the plots of his plays were more of reality and social awareness which was touching the audience pulse when his plays were enacted in theatres. The Seventeen Century was a Golden Age in the History of English Literature as the age was also named as Shakespearean Age. As G.B. Shaw rightly says ‘With plays and sonnets in our hands, we know much more about Shakespeare than we know about Dickens or Thackeray’

Shakespeare is an expert in writing comedies as well as tragedies. A hero leads to his own calamity in a tragedy of Shakespeare owing to his own flaw of weakness in his character. A Shakespearean tragedy is often based on Greek Tragedy. Which has exposition, development through conflict, climax and catastrophe. The play ‘Othello’ is a perfect example of all the features of a Greek tragedy.

Womanism in the Suffering and Murder of Desdemona

The character of Desdemona one among the tragic heroine of Shakespearean’s heroines. Her character is molded in such a way that every woman seems to identify herself with Desdemona and her sufferings. Though being very innocent and humble towards her beloved husband but still she falls prey for his jealousy which shatters her dreams. As A.C. Bradley says, ‘Desdemona is the sweetest and the most pathetic of the heroines of Shakespeare. She is as innocent as Miranda and as loving as Viola yet suffering more deeply than Cordelia or Imogen’.

Desdemona's character is very much subordinate to the male character. Shakespeare describes as having exceptional beauty and her innocence also adds to her charm. She is the daughter of a rich family and has all the lovable graces which attract men. She is humble and kind-hearted by nature and falls in love with Othello who describe his bravery in war. Desdemona says:

‘I saw Othello’s visage in his mind,

And to his honours and his valiant parts

Did I my soul and fortunes concentrate’ (Act-1)

As a daughter, Desdemona never forgot her duties. But after eloping with Othello to marry him, she was against the will and wish of her father who in turn wanted her to marry to the most handsome man in the town. Though Brabantio, the father of Desdemona admired Othello's bravery but never felt he is probable suitor for his fair and beautiful daughter. When Brabantio puts the case of elopement of Desdemona and Othello before the Duke, Desdemona confesses very boldly that she is stuck between her father and her beloved husband.

“My Noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty

To you I am bound for life and education;

My life and education both to learn me

How to respect you. You are the lord of duty;

I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband;

And so much duty as my mother showed

To you, preferring you before her father,

So much I challenge that I may profess

Due to the Moor my lord” (Act-1 Sc-ii)

Desdemona never misunderstood her husband nor tried to betray him in anyway. She always felt and believed that Othello married her for he loved her truly. It was also true that Othello loved his wife whole heartedly. But when Othello was giving chances to Iago, the most successful villain in the play and a subordinate of Othello to control his life, his love towards Desdemona started changing into jealousy and hatred. Iago as many agree as a 'Master Plotter' tried to make Othello to be under his control so that he could take revenge on him for not recruiting him to a higher position, which was given to Cassio.

Desdemona becomes prey for Othello's suspicion when she loses the handkerchief which was given by her husband as a token of love. Iago plots the scene in such a way as he gets the handkerchief stolen by Emilia, his wife to put a rift between the Othello and Desdemona. Iago very cleverly plans to spoil the mind of Othello, by saying that he has seen the handkerchief in Cassio's hand which is a gift of Othello to Desdemona. In fact, Othello, who is under the clutches of Iago keeps on asking Desdemona about the handkerchief. Desdemona out of her innocence tries to explain her husband very humbly, it is not found. Instead, when repeatedly Othello keeps on asking about the handkerchief, she persists him to take back Cassio as his Lieutenant, who was been removed by Othello earlier. This turns Othello's jealousy to a peak which is above the understanding level of Desdemona, who never imagined that her beloved husband would hate her so much that she must lose her married life.

Her beauty and fairness are no more appreciated by her husband. He strikes her publicly, but she never complains. She feels confused about the behaviour of her husband. She never ever believed or thought that her husband is so jealous of her that he is trying to plot against her.

"I was unhandsome warrior as I am-

Arranging his unkindness with my soul;

But now I find I had suborned the witness

And he's indicted falsely". (Act- III Sc-iv)

She represents a typical woman who loves her husband deeply and never dare to think or plot against him. Her innocent nature adds charm to her beauty where she cannot see people around her suffering. She understands and sympathises with Cassio who lost his job and so she tries to recommend her husband Othello to take him back. Her pleading before Othello to take Cassio as his subordinate, adds fuel to fire and makes her husband even more suspicious about his wife Desdemona having an illicit affair with Cassio. This causes a rift between the couple.

Othello never understood nor showed sympathy when he strikes her in public. On the contrary, Desdemona feels that he is stressed in work prays God to forgive him. She never got a chance to prove her innocence nor she felt to do so. The plot is close knitted that the path to come out of her husband's jealousy becomes impossible for her. She never misinterpreted or misunderstood the behaviour of her husband towards her. When Othello tries to corner her also, she simply says:

"Your wife my Lord: your true and loyal wife" (Act- IV)

Her love and affection for her husband never fades even when Othello blames her for having an affair with Cassio. She confesses that:

"I am a true Christian, if this to preserve this vessel for my lord

From any other foul unlawful touch

Be not to be a strumpet, I am none" (Act-IV)

After being brutally insulted by her husband, Desdemona very innocently thinks ways and means to get back her husband's love and affection. She pleads Iago to advise her to win her husband's love not knowing that Iago was the master plotter behind her sufferings.

"Alas, Iago, What shall I do to win my lord again?

Good friend, go to him; for by this light of heaven,

I know not how I lost him, Here I knee: “(Act-IV)

The fate of Desdemona is decided by Othello when he advise her very softly to be alone in the chamber. Desdemona is very happy and content that she can manage to regain his love and affection. On the contrary, Othello was waiting to put an end to her. He advises her to say her prayers for the last time and gives her hint that he is going to kill her, still she doesn't believe and says:

“And yet I fear you, for you're fatal then

When your eyes roll so. Why I should fear I know not,

Since guiltiness I know not, but I feel I fear.” (Act-V Sc-ii)

Desdemona keeps her conscience clear and very patiently tries to convince her husband when he accuses her of having an affair with Cassio:

“I never did offend you in my life; never loved Cassio

But with such general warranty of heaven

As I might love. I never gave him token’ (Act-V Sc-ii)

Her love for her husband is so determined that even though he tries to accuse her virginity, she keeps her coolness and tries to confess her love for her husband. Inwardly she is undergoing a suffering and pain of being betrayed by her lovable husband she never loses her temper and maintains her emotional balance to convince him. She even goes a step further in innocently asking him to not kill her immediately but postpone the murder for the next day.

“Kill me tomorrow, Let me live tonight” (Act-V-Sc-ii)

Conclusion

Desdemona is a lady of spirit and true to her heart. She loved her husband deeply that she left her father's love behind for the sake of her husband, Othello. She represents many women in the society who love their husbands deeply and live and die for their sake. For Desdemona, Othello was her hero of bravery and died for his sake. She calmly suffered when her husband was wrongly accusing her for having an affair. She never ever imagined that her hero in life would put such false accusation on her virginity. In a despair of losing his love, Desdemona still defends him from the consequences of his actions. She is committed herself to Othello her beloved husband, without his love she cannot live.

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